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Technology and Young Children: What Parents Should Know

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It is not unusual to see a young child today slip a CD into a stereo system, set a digital alarm clock or even program a VCR. Children quickly learn to use technology that is part of their daily lives, often with greater ease than their parents or other adults.

But does their ability to do these complex tasks really enhance children's development? Does using technology really teach children new skills? What should parents know about the role of technology in children's learning?

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children's *Young Children: Active Learners in a Technological Age*, computers can be active or passive agents for learning. Parents who recognize the difference will choose appropriate computer programs for their children.

As passive users, children utilize tools with no understanding of the concepts represented on the screen. The computer becomes an electronic worksheet that asks children to memorize without comprehending.

As active agents for learning, computers extend children's abilities, helping them to accomplish goals and objectives. In active use, children understand the relationship between real ideas and what is being represented on the screen. Constructing relationships between pictures and concrete objects helps children establish meaning.

In order to promote effective computer learning, parents should monitor the quality of the software children use, the amount of time children work with it and the way in which they use it.

What should you teach your preschool children about technology?

Here are some suggestions

- People control technology, and technology can be used for activities that are meaningful to people.
- Technology can take different forms, as in calculators, telephones and tape recorders. It provides different, useful things in a variety of ways.
- Technology has rules that control how it works. Objects must have a source of power:

they have plugs or batteries; computers must have instructions, either built-in or provided by the user.

- Computer programs require different ways of organizing thinking. Some will ask you to match and rhyme, others will give you the freedom to draw or paint whatever you wish.

Some parents express concerns about the role of technology in children's lives, such as how it will affect children's attention to social relationships and other activities. Appropriate computer programs promote dialogue between children, as well as group problem-solving. They also offer opportunities for shared experiences between parents and children. As partners in our children's learning, we may not only monitor their educational environments, but we may experience their progress first-hand.

Checking out good software for children

1. Software uses pictures and spoken instructions rather than written ones so that children will not need to ask for help.
2. Children control the level of difficulty, the pace and direction of the program.
3. Software offers variety: Children can explore a number of topics on different levels.
4. Children receive quick feedback, so they stay interested.
5. The program utilizes the capacities of today's computers by appealing to children through interesting sights and sounds.
6. To determine a product's appropriateness for a child's current level of development, parents have evaluated the skill list and activities as described on the package, and previewed the product through store demonstration or a friend's computer.
7. Software engages children's interest by encouraging children to laugh and use their imagination in exploring.
8. The program allows children to experience success and feel empowered through learning.

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